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Education of Women in Ancient Greece, 19th & 20th Centuries as Compared to Today

By: Olha Skarzhynska

Although women today enjoy many different educational opportunities, the philosophy and social practices in female education have undergone radical transformation. For the most part, when analyzing women's role in educational landscape, one pattern emerges- education of girls or lack thereof reflects the greater overall social views on women's role in society. Hence, through Ancient Greek era, as well as through 19th and 20th centuries, these social patterns explain dominant belief systems that ultimately reflected on or impacted girls' ability to attain the same levels of education as their male counterparts. Indeed, what we take for granted in our contemporary society, and that is in the western cultures- for the most part- girls are not restricted from attaining any educational success. Today, we have females with PhDs, we have women professors, scholars, and researchers. We have no gender-restricted professional roles any longer since women now enter professions that were, for the most part, in the past more common to males. These professions range from female locksmiths, to female taxi drivers, to female pilots, to many other employment interests. So, ultimately, in our modern society, all employment titles are now expected to be gender neutral - instead of saying "stewardess" it is more appropriate to say "flight attendant" and instead of saying "mailman," we say "mail carrier."

Nevertheless, to truly recognize the significant accomplishments that women have attained in primary, secondary, and graduate education, we must recognize influences that social belief systems and behavioral patterns had during the ancient times, during or after political conflicts, and during radical industrialization. Today's opportunities are certainly a big accomplishment, hence, the following paper will analyze differences in opportunities in the Ancient Greek culture, through 19th and 20th century, and finally will compare these achievements with the opportunities that women have today.

Female Education and Ancient Greek Society

The ancient Greeks had very particular views on women in their society. Roberts & Barrett (2004) explain that, "According to Greek social ideals, women spent most of their lives indoors" (p. 59). Still, the majority of Greek women needed to work in manual positions or as personal servants, but jobs that they usually held did not require any form of knowledge that males generally acquired in universities. Whether women were wealthy or not, education was not a priority regardless of their responsibilities in life. No woman was ever appointed to a legislative position or to a leadership position, regardless of her social or financial status. Most of ancient Greek

literature, and ancient historical accounts, focus on heroic male accounts as either warriors or powerful leaders. Hence, Greeks did not see female education as essential, and in fact, women's roles in ancient Greek epics or historical records from the time illustrate women's roles as very limited, as explained by Roberts & Barrett (2004). In fact, even in Aristotle's writings there are references to the intellectual inferiority of women. Aristotle believed that it is useless to educate women considering that they lacked any intellectual capacity to learn (Tehie, 2007). Women's primary role, in Aristotle's opinion, was to be strong enough to withstand childbirth, and even insisted that women must be married by the age of 18, so that she can begin heaving children.

According to Ornstein & Levine (2008), "In male-dominated Greek society, only a minority of exceptional women received any formal education" (p. 66). Furthermore, Athenian women did not usually attend schools and had extremely limited legal and economic rights. There was a difference however even in the limited opportunities between Sparta and Athens. While very few Athenian women were able to receive a home-based education, more often than not in religious topics and practices, Sparta was always more military-based so even when women were lucky enough to receive any form of education, mainly it was centered in physical and military training, as the main goal was to prepare good wives for Spartan soldiers (Ornstein & Levine, 2008).

It was a general belief at the time that women, by their very nature, lacked authoritative capacity, and were too emotional to be in charge of anything,

including their own households. Ancient Greek attitudes were very male-dominated, as noted by Ornstein & Levine (2008). It was highly unusual to teach young girls how to read. After all, they were expected to marry early and their husbands were usually much older in age. Young girls moved from being children to being wives and mothers in a very short time period (Tehie, 2007). This concept of female inferiority persisted until later societies, and even centuries later, in our Western part of the world, women were only able to finally gain recognition and equality in the twentieth century. So, women were expected to be obedient sisters, mothers, wives, and daughters (Tehie, 2007).

Female Education in the Nineteenth Century

It is extremely important to understand how female education was perceived in ancient cultures because starting 19th century, radical changes started taking place in the social perceptions and acceptance of female rights. Up until the 19th century, women did not have their own property, they lacked any legal rights or claims to any possessions, and were consistently perceived as incompetent, overly emotional, and unable to make leadership decisions (DeBare, 2004). Nineteenth century was a significant time in the overall women's rights movement. Attention to women's education arose from the need to provide more competent teaching workforce as the country was starting to industrialize and there were new professional and economic demands nation-wide (DeBare, 2004).

Secondary schools began to arise in the 1800's and were called "academies". The

curriculum varied depending on the school, and the term "female seminary" was then used to describe these academic institutions. The female seminary movement began around 1815, as many prominent women's movement leaders took on the cause of promoting women's rights and women's continued education. Among these prominent leaders were: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Emma Willard, and Susan B. Anthony (Ornstein & Levine, 2008). Catherine Beecher, who was an educator herself, was the founder of the Hartford Female Seminary. Beecher was an advocate of women's education and believed that the teaching profession provided women with a "socially useful career path at a time when their opportunities for higher education and professional positions were severely limited" (Ornstein & Levine, 2008, p. 134). Beecher wanted young ladies to have a good education, so in the beginning she taught all the subjects almost by herself. In fact, Beecher felt that it was imperative for young women to learn such subjects as: philosophy, chemistry, ancient and modern history, geography, grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, algebra, geometry, moral philosophy, natural theology and Latin (DeBare, 2004).

Mid 1800s was a notable time for women's achievements in higher education. In the mid-nineteenth century, women were finally entering the world of secondary or higher education. The first actual college to admit women was Oberlin College which was chartered in 1833 (DeBare, 2004). Oberlin was founded by a group of abolitionists and from its beginning admitted both African American males and women. Nevertheless, although Oberlin College admitted women, they were still not allowed to participate in certain courses that were

geared only toward male students. In addition, while no male was required to take a course on how to be a good father and husband, ironically enough, women were required to complete what was known as the "Ladies Course" that even then still emphasized marriage and motherhood over careers (DeBare, 2004). In 1836, Georgia Female College was the first to actually use the word "college" rather than "seminary" and offered a preparatory program for women that spanned over one year. Besides Georgia College, Mount Holyoke Seminary and Elmira Female College were opened as well as single-gender colleges (Madigan, 2009). Most of the schools and colleges for girls were modeled after the English finishing schools, explains Madigan (2009). The main objectives of female education was to provide young women with moral, literary, and domestic education. Nevertheless, throughout the 1800s, there were by far more boys' schools than schools that provided single-gender girls' education (Jeynes, 2007). What is perhaps most surprising is that in relatively short time period and before the change of the century, the number of girls receiving a school education far outnumbered the boys. Indeed, nearly 60% of all students in classrooms were girls by their teenage years (Jeynes, 2007).

Female Education in the Twentieth Century

While nineteenth century marks a significant change in the way female education was perceived or accepted in the male-dominated society, there were even greater changes in the following, twentieth, century. What had begun as a single-gender educational system, by the early twentieth century became predominately

coeducational. Still, coeducation did not ensure equal opportunity (Maddigan, 2009). For the most part, changes in educational landscapes evolved in response to a better understanding of scientific processes, research methods, sociological studies of educational processes, as well as changes in legislations. Indeed, during the middle of the 20th century, several major Supreme Court

decisions and legislation created greater opportunities for women, but the battle was a difficult one. Issues of gender and racial inequalities in the early to mid-twentieth century played a significant role in the legislative decision-making and evolution of laws that provided protection of women's educational rights.

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